

A Brief History of the Property now known as Downs Park in Anne Arundel County, Maryland

Compiled by Park Superintendent Rick Holt

The property on which Downs Park is situated is located on Bodkin Neck in North Eastern Anne Arundel County. Bodkin Point, the Northern-most tip of Bodkin Neck, juts out into the mouth of the Patapsco River. The Neck is bounded by Chesapeake Bay to the East, the Patapsco River to the North, and Bodkin Creek to the West. The name "Bodkin" presumably refers to the narrow needle-like shape of the neck. Bodkin Neck was in 1850 considered for the strategic location of a fort, as being valuable to the defense of Sparrows Point. No fort was ever built though, and the history of Bodkin Neck is written in a less dramatic tone. Through the 17th and 18th century Bodkin Neck was the property of landlords and speculators.

The property came to the hands of Charles Carroll of Carrollton and Richard Caton in the early 1800's. Charles Carroll was "guaranteeing the notes of Richard Caton" of Baltimore City, who evidently did not have the same credit power as that which was carried by the signature of Carroll. Thus Caton became the owner of Gibson Enclosure by giving a mortgage to Charles Carroll. Richard Caton purchased the land as real estate speculation. In 1828 Henry C. Dunbar purchased most of what is now Bodkin Neck. Over the next 30 years Henry Dunbar built up a thriving farm called Bodkin Farm on land north of a canal which divides Bodkin Neck in half. That portion of the neck south of the canal is the present location of Downs Park. "Historically the land south of the canal was the site of lumbering activities." At some point in the mid 1800's the land south of the canal was converted to farmland and eventually became known as Deer Park Farm. First hand information concerning life on Deer Park Farm during the period 1887 to 1898 was obtained by an interview with Mr. Moody Carl Schmidt who lived on the farm with his father, August Carl Schmidt during that period. According to Moody Schmidt, "What we grew on the farm was vegetables, tomatoes, cantaloupes, watermelon and we had a small peach orchard on one part of the west end of the farm. The produce was sent to Baltimore by sailboat."

Our knowledge of activities on the farm dim a bit for the period 1898 to 1913, but in 1913 the property was purchased by H.R. Mayo Thom, and a lively narrative can be written of the period 1913 to 1937 when the property was the summer estate of Mr. Thom. It is during this period that we first hear the property referred to as Rocky Beach Farm. The farm was named for the red sandstone which thrusts up out of the sand on the beach. With 2000 ft. of Chesapeake Bay beachfront, 150 acres of woods and fields and a quiet cove on Bodkin Creek to dock his 60 ft. yacht, "The Tonkaway," Rocky Beach Farm was indeed the perfect location to build a summer estate, and Mr. Thom was just the man to take this "fixer upper" and transform it into a family showplace.

H.R. Mayo Thom was a man of energy and activity, he was warm, enthusiastic and debonair. A tobacco importer by trade, he imported tobacco from Cuba and Puerto Rica, and served as President of Baltimore Leaf Tobacco Company. In 1900 Hunt (Mr. Thom) began an aviary which eventually became quite large. A story in the Baltimore Sun on March 12, 1911 describes the aviary. In this same year on October 3, Hunt Reynolds Mayo Thom married Helen Rolfe Hopkins.

Helen, called Nellie, was an independent, sweet woman, with rock-like determination. She was a rather sedentary person, who spent a lot of her time sitting in the window of her room or in the living room reading. Sometimes she walked down to the beach to watch the children swimming. Occasionally she would go out in the canoe with Hunt on the Bay or go out on the Tonkaway for family excursions. Nellie played an active role in running the household and met with the servants daily to see that things went smoothly. In 1929 Nellie published a book "Johns Hopkins, A Silhouette" about her great uncle. The newlyweds went to Havana for their honeymoon and then returned to Roland Park. Between March 1902 and March 1905 Nellie had 3 children: Catherine Reynolds, Helen Rolfe, and Annette Hopkins Rolfe. The eldest daughter, Catherine Thom, wrote a book, "Three Under Three," describing her two sisters and life growing up in Roland Park. It was a carefree life typical of a wealthy Baltimore family. Catherine never went to school except for one year, before spending 3 years at the Maryland Institute of Art. She received her early education from a governess at home in Roland Park. The family had a cook, a butler, and a chauffeur. These servants stayed with the family on their yearly pilgrimage to Rocky Beach Farm which began soon after Hunt bought the farm in November 1912.

Catherine Thom describes how they came to buy Rocky Beach Farm:

"I had a Grandmother, his mother (Hunt's) who died. She was a very wealthy woman and my father I'm sure inherited from her, because he didn't work if he didn't have to after she died. I think he bought Rocky Beach Farm with some of the money he inherited from her but before he bought Rocky Beach he had been looking around at other places on the water, he wanted to be on the Bay so they use to explore and drive around. They went down in that part of the country and I have pictures of them picnicking on the causeway to Gibson Island and the mainland when it was just a big sandbar. They saw Rocky Beach and bought it."

Asked to describe her first impressions of Rocky Beach farm, Catherine Thom recalls: "There was a marvelous Bay view. Wonderful! Two huge trees out front. Two huge white Mulberry trees that went with Hurricane Hazel!" There was a farmhouse that even at that time appeared to have been added on to from some smaller structure. The family thought it had been added on to because in the very center of the house there were two rooms that had doors of hand hewn timber and very heavy. This would have been the same farmhouse in which Moody Carl Schmidt lived from 1887-1898. Moody describes the same house thus, "...the house had three big rooms and had two small rooms inside of it. These rooms were used earlier as a bathroom and kitchen together and when we moved in we used them solely as a kitchen...upstairs there were four rooms..."

Mr. Thom immediately set about improving the house. The house evolved into a rambling twenty room mansion. The house was expanded on it's long axis and porches were added on the North and South sided of the house. Apparently the Thom family did not come regularly to Rocky Beach farm until the work had been completed on the house. The installation of indoor plumbing and toilet were apparently also done, since Catherine Thom has no recollection of using the outhouse and outside well described by Moody Schmidt. "We had an ice house and 'Privy' or privatehouse not much bigger than that desk there. It had two seats so two people could sit at one time," said Mr. Schmidt. So Mr. Thom saw to it that they had all the conveniences of the city at their summer estate. In fact, there was even electricity run by a generator. Old photographs of the early

years of Rocky Beach farm show several large barns and outbuildings. Also there appear to be several buildings of a design locally known as "picker's shanties," which housed migrant farm labor when the farm had been a working produce farm. These farm buildings were all left from the previous owner. These meager improvements shrink by comparison to the major improvement made by Mr. Thom during the ensuing years.

As Catherine Thom recalls:

"My father was busy always doing something on the farm. The first thing he did was drain the marshy woodland; because there was malaria there. My mother had a very bad case of malaria. One of the workman had one and the wife of our farmer had malaria. The malaria mosquito's were there and then the woods were quite swampy in places so he dug these drainage ditches... Also he made the road out that we use to use... We had gatepost made of iron rock... and to make these ditches and so on he imported some Negroes from South River; about 6 I suppose. And as they worked they use to sing and we use to stand listening to them sing. Quite marvelous!"

And so the work began. Hunt also built seven cottages scattered throughout the property for workman and family. He built a brick walkway to a summer gazebo on the bayfront where the family spent many a quiet evening. Also on the waterfront he built a bath house for changing clothes to go swimming in the bay. And on the south side of the house Mr. Thom had constructed a formal Victorian style garden.

Catherine Thom describes the garden:

"As you approached it from the house there was a low iron ore fence wall and then there was a place where there were two little paths and an arbor. And an arbor went back to the woods from that covered with Dorothy Perkins rose, and Mother had four very formal beds, two on each side of the arbor, very formal... these were all brick paths... There was a summer house on the back side of the garden with a thatched roof... there was a stone bench in an informal natural part of the garden... Mother called it the wishing bench..."

With all its improvements and natural beauty the Thoms needed little incentive to come out to the summer estate each year. They would even come out during the colder months for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Generally each year the family moved from Roland Park to Rocky Beach Farm in May depending, of course, on the weather. During the winter months the farm was under the care of a workman, William Wilson.

Catherine Thom describes William Wilson:

"William Wilson's mother had been my grandmother Thom's housekeeper-seamstress in grandma's house at 828 Park Avenue in Baltimore. William was Mrs. Wilson's only child. When William was eighteen years old he was working in a place where there was heavy machinery. His sleeve got caught in a cog on one of the machines and before it could be stopped William's arm was so mangled it had to be amputated at the shoulder. He was a right handed man and it was his right arm that was cut off."

"When he had recovered he did odd jobs for my grandmother. After grandma's death William came to live with us at Rocky Beach Farm. He was very adaptable and learned to do house painting and gardening which became his chief jobs. He also took care of the little motor that ran the electricity for the house. This was done with dry cells, if I am correct. He and Disney were very good friends"

"During the winter he must have been lonely when we were all in Baltimore. He hunted for driftwood on the beach which he built into splendid open fires for us when we went to the farm for a few days, off and on, during the cold months. During the winter the

bedrooms were heated with coal stoves, ventilated by pipes set into the wall. In the summer the stoves were taken down and tin plates put over the holes. It was William's job to build the fires in these stoves and keep them stoked."

"William also cooked for us during our winter visits. He was an excellent cook. The lack of an arm didn't seem to bother him at all. He made delicious little pancakes and baked bread, which he was able to slice with one hand. We spent Thanksgiving at Rocky Beach and several Christmases. William always cooked the entire dinner, including a large turkey."

"He had never had much to do with horses until he came to Rocky Beach. But during the long lonely winter months he made friends with them and actually taught them to do tricks. Somewhere I have a picture of him in the field with two of the mares, William is holding his hand up over his head and the horses are prancing on their hind legs."

"He absolutely adored my father. He never worked for anyone except our family. After my father died and mother sold the farm William was taken over by my sister Annette, and her husband, Jack Cromwell, who then lived in Ruxton. Jack built William a small house much like the one he had occupied at Rocky Beach. William lived with the Cromwells, doing their gardening and odd jobs, until he developed cancer and died."

Much of the actual farm work was done by another gentleman, Reginald Giddings. Mr. Giddings was an Englishman who came to work for Mr. Thom in the early years of Rocky Beach Farm. His skill with horses eventually won him the position of farmer for the Thoms. Rocky Beach Farm was more of a gentleman's farm than a working farm. Crops were raised to feed the animals. Although Mr. Thom had an Overland car and a limousine, most of the travel was done by horse. Reg Giddings was apparently also quite a handyman. He had learned the thatching trade from his father in England, so many of the outbuildings on Rocky Beach Farm had thatched roofs. Existing photographs show the summer house in the garden and the toolhouse at the dock at Locust Cove both had thatched roofs. Another piece of handiwork, the wishing bench, in the garden was built by Reg Giddings. The wishing bench still stands today.

Catherine Thom describes a typical day on Rocky Beach Farm for her mother, father and the children:

"We were awakened every morning by what we called the 'Rising Bell'. This was rung by Lloyd, the butler, twenty minutes later he rang again to announce breakfast being served. After breakfast Mother sat in the living room and had a conference with Liza, the cook, about meals for the day. Then after Mother had smoked her first cigar of the day she often walked through the garden with William Wilson to talk over the condition of the plants. The garden was fertilized with manure from the manure pit by the stable. But the sandy soil was very porous and nutrients soon leached away. Mother had learned what flowers did best under this condition and stuck to the most suitable varieties."

"Later in the day Mother sometimes drove around the farm with my father in his little Overland Car. He had learned to drive this car in second gear only. He never learned to shift gears. Driving the dirt roads in second gear the car heated up, but this didn't worry my father. The Overland was never driven by anyone but my father, it was his special pet."

"My father was a man of energy and activity. He was always out on the farm somewhere, supervising the men, or up on the Tonkaway, which was docked at Locust Cove. The boat was one of his greatest pleasures. Several times during the summer he took us all out

for an extended cruise. We often explored various rivers in Maryland and Virginia, visiting cousins up the York River in Virginia, visiting friends in Chestertown and dropping anchor in the Chester River near my uncle, Decoury Thom's estate, Blakeford. When we were cruising for any length of time the chauffeur became cook and engineer. The Tonkaway had three cabins and three heads. The forward cabin had two bunks and a head. It was used by the cook-engineer and the extra crewman who always went on the boat. My father could not manage it by himself. The center cabin had four bunks and a head. It was for us girls and our friends. The rear cabin and its head were for our parents. It had beds instead of bunks. The boat was sixty feet long. I don't remember the width of its beam. The Tonkaway was run by a diesel engine."

"We had a great deal of company in those days and a run down the bay and a picnic lunch on the Tonkaway was a regular event."

"In the evening after dinner, if there were no guests, my parents walked down the path to the summer house overlooking the Bay. They sat there alone, by the hours smoking and watching the shipping on the Bay. They were very romantic and deeply in love, which they continued to be the whole of their life together."

"We (the children) were as free as little Indians following the mood of the moment. Often we rode horseback through the country roads or up to the abandoned farm which is now Pinehurst. We had learned to bridle and saddle the horses, but always had one of the men tighten our saddle girths. Very frequently we hitched the pony to the pony cart and drove up to get the mail. The mail was put into boxes that stood in a row near Mt. Carmel Church. Across from the church was a country store run by Mr. and Mrs. Chairs. We always went into the store to talk to the Chairs and get 5 cents worth of country cheese, which was cut from a large wheel. It was delicious. We ate it on the way home. Later the mail boxes were put up at the entrances of the farms along the road."

"Of course we swam almost daily. And exploring the beach was endlessly interesting. We frequently walked up to the Bodkin Point Light House, which was still standing. At the base of a bank on Pinehurst beach there were several large stumps of ancient cypress trees showing where the level of the land had once been. Geologists from Hopkins University use to bring their students down to look at these fossil trees. Also there were layers of clay in a bank near the iron rock on Rocky Beach. The clay was in lavender white stripes."

"As I have already said, we had a lot of company at Rocky Beach. Sometimes older people for Mother and Daddy, sometimes boys and girls to visit us girls. We swam, explored the beach, went out in the Tonkaway and made drift wood fires on the beach where we roasted hot dogs on long sticks, and toasted marshmallows."

The Thoms numbered among their guests at Rocky Beach Farm such noteworthies as J. Wilson Leakin, who will be remembered in Baltimore for his generous gift to the city of Leakin Park, and Walter Decourzon Poultney, a prominent figure in the social world in Baltimore. The Thom servants, of course, played their part in keeping the household running smoothly and easing the stay of the many guests and visitors to Rocky Beach Farm. Catherine Thom takes a personal look at the servants and their activities on Rocky Beach Farm:

"We had the same servants at Rocky Beach that we had in Baltimore. Over the twenty years we lived on the farm there were some changes, But I shall describe the ones who were there the longest time. They all lived in the house except William Wilson. He lived

on the farm, summer and winter, in a small house my father had built for him between the kitchen and apple orchard."

"Liza, the cook, was a stout, short colored woman. She had trouble with bunions and slashed her shoes in an attempt to be comfortable. She always wore a starched white cap with an upflaring brim. She cooked on a wood stove at first. Later this was augmented with a kerosene stove. It is my impression that Liza could not read. Liza stayed at Rocky Beach all summer without any breaks. It must have been lonely for her. Sometimes on a moon-light night she would walk down to the little dock on the beach and sit there singing hymns. Her voice was rich and deep and her singing sounded like all the loneliness in the world."

"Lloyd, the butler, was a neat dapper little Negro with a mustache. Liza hated him. We didn't know why. But Liza knew he was sampling the wares of the liquor closet. When a beloved friend came to dinner one night, and my father bought out some fine old brandy he had saved for a special occasion, the brandy was so watered down that it was undrinkable. After that we understood Liza's attitude. The lock on the liquor closet was changed. In summer there use to be a camp meeting at Jacobsville. Lloyd went to a meeting and got religion. Next day he tried to make up to Liza by telling her she was his 'sister in the Lord.' She took up a broomstick, told him not to 'sister her' and chased the little man all the way to the barn. Lloyd's room was over the laundry on the second floor."

"The chauffeur was Eberly Disney. He was a tall, thin white man who was a fine mechanic and a smooth, safe driver. We had what was called a 'touring car' for summer and a limousine for winter. They were both Chalmers cars. He and Liza both slept on the third floor of the house. There was a tub of running cold water in the hall, and wash stands with basins, pitchers and slop jars in the rooms, very old fashioned amenities."

"Fraulein had come to live with us when we were growing children. She also did the mending and took care of the second floor. She had a room on the second floor. She was not at all in the servant class."

Although Rocky Beach farm was almost entirely self-contained the Thoms did have regular contact with the rest of the community and a couple of events on the bay were witnessed by the Thoms. Catherine Thom relates:

"There was a man named Pat Flannigan who lived next door to Rocky Beach Farm. He had the next farm. And he was a contractor and Irish and he murdered the King's English, but he was a delightful person and my father use to have him over, and they would sit in front of the fireplace and talk. Then there was Dr. Billingsly, the only doctor down there and he lived quite a way up the road, up even near Jacobsville, I think. He went around behind fine horses in a buggy and he was a very fine man. He use to come down and talk to my father, when he had time, which was not very often. But then we entertained the farmers down there. We had parties for the whole area. For instance, on the Fourth of July we'd ask them all over and we would have fireworks and shoot them out near the summerhouse and the bay. We would ask all the neighboring farmers and their wives and children to Halloween parties. We would go riding every day. The mail boxes were up near Mt. Carmel Church (approx. 1 mile south of Rocky Beach Farm.) We had to go all the way up there to get the mail. And the post office was in Lakeshore. There as a sort of country store connected with the Post Office and run by a family named Sidel, ... Old Mrs. Sidel couldn't speak English very well. So one time we knew there was a letter that had been sent that had money or a money order or something in it and it was there all the

time. She hadn't been able to read the address (laugh). (Out on the bay) the first submarine that passed through Baltimore passed through there. The first camouflage ship I ever saw in the war I never heard the word camouflage before, that was something new...sometimes huge schooners with four and five masts would go by. And there was a boat called the Alum Chine carrying explosives. It blew up in Baltimore Harbor and some of the dynamite sticks washed up on Rocky Beach. I remember finding one of those sticks up near the lily pond and carrying it home with great pride. And having my father say "for heavens sake! Get rid of that thing! (laugh)"

So life on Rocky Beach farm was never dull for the Thoms. There was a constant flurry of social activity and farm activity. For the children it was a life of absolute leisure and fun. For the adults Rocky Beach Farm provided a place for reflection and leisure, and a change of pace from city life in Roland Park. For the community there were few lasting changes, but for those interested in the history of the property now known as Downs Park, the story of Rocky Beach Farm as the summer estate of the Thom family is a rich lively narrative not soon to be forgotten. In the words of Catherine Thom Parsons: "Growing up at Rocky Beach Farm was a kind of perfection that bit deeply into our memories never to be forgotten. No matter who owns the place now, for my sisters and I it is still psychologically our home."